

Soldiers *Online*

Recruiti



Los Angeles at night is a city of lights. The metropolis is actually composed of many smaller cities and neighborhoods, which run the gamut from underprivileged to very wealthy. It is a home to movie stars and gang members, and it is a tough place to be an Army recruiter.

ng in L.A.

Story and Photos by SSG John Valceanu

IT was 7 a.m. in downtown Los Angeles. The sun had just risen, lighting up the haze-covered Hollywood hills. SSG Francisco Alejandro, an Army recruiter, was stuck in traffic on one of the city's gridlocked freeways on his way to East L.A. His cell phone rang. The caller informed him that a recruit scheduled for in-processing never showed up at the Military Entrance Processing Station.

Digging into his organizer, which bulged with notes and reminders, Alejandro found the recruit's number and punched it into his cell phone. The young man's mother answered, and Alejandro held a conversation with her in Spanish. The boy left, she told him; he went to the airport to fly out to basic training. No, she said, she doesn't know what airline he's planning to fly on.

Alejandro thanked her and hung up. He reviewed his morning's appointments and started calling people to reschedule. He knew he'd have to somehow find his recruit at the airport and get him back to the MEPS station.

Meanwhile, across the county in the seaside city of Santa Monica, SSG Michael Bocanegra was running on the sidewalk along the beach. Also a recruiter, Bocanegra wore his physical fitness uniform. While stopped at a light, a young lady asked him: "Are you in the Army?"

Bocanegra replied that he indeed is in the Army, and he asked her if she had any interest in joining. She said she thought about it, but decided to go to college instead. The recruiter told her about some of the tuition assistance and student loan repayment benefits the Army offers. When the light changed, the young lady was on her

way, and the recruiter finished his run. He hurried to shower and change before meeting a recruit at the station by 9 a.m.

Alejandro and Bocanegra work in one of the country's largest and most famous cities. But recruiting in metropolitan Los Angeles is not a glamorous business. Recruiters work long hours, have unpredictable schedules and face a myriad of challenges. Those challenges are different in affluent Santa Monica, where Bocanegra recruits, from those faced by Alejandro in East Los Angeles, where virtually everyone is of Hispanic descent, and English is often not spoken in the home.

"There are a lot of obstacles to overcome in recruiting here in East L.A.," Alejandro said. "Often, the people who are most interested in enlisting aren't qualified, and the ones who are qualified often don't want to enlist. Another situation I run across is that I'll find candidates who are both interested and qualified, but whose parents will not support them in their decision."

Cultural factors play a big part in the challenges Alejandro faces. For example, when the recruiter stops to talk to two young men waiting for the bus, he finds out that they are brothers and that the older one has just gotten out of prison after serving almost a decade for manslaughter. Though he says he doesn't want his little brother



SSG Michael Bocanegra, a recruiter working the affluent city of Santa Monica, discusses various Army career fields with possible recruit Cris Clark.

following in his footsteps, the ex-convict doesn't want him to join the Army, either.

"The Army's too dangerous," the older brother said. "It will get him killed."

Alejandro says he often runs across this perception of the military as an overly dangerous profession. He finds this ironic, in neighborhoods where drug-dealing gang members compete with college and military recruiters for young talent, and where drive-by shootings are a way of life.

"Parents tell me: 'I don't want to send my son or daughter into the Army because they might get killed,'" Alejandro said. "I tell them: 'Ma'am, look at where you live. The Army isn't that dangerous. This is dangerous.'"



Bocanegra shows recruit Paco Erskine a multimedia presentation on what he can expect when he arrives at Fort Jackson, S.C., for basic training.

"The Army is the best thing that could happen to some of these kids," Alejandro said. "It would get them off these streets and give them a shot at a real life. But, a lot of times, those who need it most want it the least."

To reach the maximum number of eligible candidates, Alejandro spends several hours each day speaking to high school juniors and seniors. As he walks into East L.A.'s Roosevelt High School, the security guards at the door nod a greeting in his direction. They know him. As he walks through the corridors, students wave and say hello.

His talks to students focus on skill training and educational benefits, and other unique opportunities offered by the Army. He also shares his personal story as a way of reaching out to the students.

Born in Mexico and raised in Arizona, Alejandro joined the Army after high school because he saw it as a stepping stone to a better life. He was a combat cameraman and had the opportunity to travel all over the world. He also earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Maryland, and is considering attending graduate school.

"I try to relate to the kids, try to reach them by giving them insights about me," Alejandro said. "I try to show them how good the Army has

been in my life. Unfortunately, 17- and 18-year-old kids aren't always very good at listening. I like to think that I'm planting a seed, and that maybe in a year or two they'll remember that the Army is an option for them."

Alejandro said that the type of bright, motivated young person sought by the Army is the same person sought by colleges. It's often difficult to compete with the allure of scholarships and promises of financial aid.

"I try to tell them that if they run out of money, or if they find that they're not ready for college, we're still going to be here for them," Alejandro said. "A lot of the work I do won't be visible for a year or two, until after I'm off recruiting duty."

Alejandro didn't volunteer for recruiting duty, and he wasn't initially pleased with being selected, particularly when he learned he would have to stay in Los Angeles. He had previously been stationed at the Armed Forces Network station in nearby Riverside.

"We were hoping to PCS somewhere else, maybe overseas, and I'd never really considered recruiting as part of my career plan," Alejandro said. "But I decided to make the best of it, and it's worked out. Now, I think it's really rewarding to match up the right people for the Army with the Army."

Like Alejandro, Bocanegra also never planned to be a recruiter. Following graduation from Southwest Texas



SSG Francisco Alejandro explains a computerized assessment test to Juan Gil. The test is designed to predict a person's performance on the ASVAB test.

State University eight years ago with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice, Bocanegra enlisted as an infantryman because he thought infantry tactics and techniques would give him valuable skills for a law-enforcement career.

He was a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C., and in the airborne combat team stationed in Vicenza, Italy. He was training for the special forces qualification course when he was notified that he'd been placed on recruiting duty.

"I wasn't very pleased at first. My thought was that this isn't what I signed up to do in the Army," Bocanegra said. "But I approached it with a positive attitude, like everything else I've done in the Army, and it's has become a good experience."

Bocanegra said recruiting is unlike any of his other assignments, and it requires a different set of skills.



Bocanegra answers Clark's questions about other people who enlisted at the Santa Monica station.

"This is a totally different kind of stress. You're expected to bring in a certain number of recruits each month, but so much of that is out of your hands," he said. "Recruits get pregnant, they fail to graduate high school, or their friends and parents talk them out of it."

Bocanegra is also recruiting from a different pool of applicants from Alejandro's. While young people in East L.A. are most interested in opportunities to earn money to attend college or to gain employment experience, many of the young people in Santa Monica are looking for adventure. Money for college or skill training isn't so much an issue.

"A lot of these kids are just looking for adrenaline rushes. I tell them, you can surf and skate all you

want, but until you've thrown yourself out of a jet aircraft at 800 feet in the middle of the night, you don't know what excitement is," Bocanegra said.

Most of the recruits Bocanegra processes go into the infantry, the military police or the medical fields. In East L.A., many of the applicants achieving the highest scores on the ASVAB also go into the medical field, but the bulk of the recruits enter career fields such as personnel and administration, fields that impart skills that transfer easily into the civilian world.

The recruiting challenges in Santa Monica are also different from those in East L.A. For example, while East L.A. high schools and teachers normally receive recruiters with open doors, Bocanegra finds considerable bias among teachers and administrators.

"A lot of them grew up and went to college during the '60s and '70s, and they remember the draft," Bocanegra said. "They've got these old ideas about what the military is, and they're not aware of the opportunities that we offer. They're not even willing to listen to us."

While it might be more difficult for Bocanegra to reach potential high school recruits, he said he has a large pool of college students from which to draw.

"It's relatively cheap to go to a state college in California, and people in this part of town usually have enough money to go," he said. "We go to a lot of career fairs at the community



Alejandro explains to students how Army programs work during one of his visits to an area high school.



During his class visit Alejandro answers a student's question about basic training.

colleges and even some of the four-year colleges."

Bocanegra said he tries to explain to college students that, while they may have education, the Army can impart skills and experience that, coupled with the education, can lead to long and meaningful careers.

Bocanegra said the student-loan repayment program is also very attractive to those college graduates who may be struggling under the burden of debts. The program is a great recruiting tool because it brings highly qualified applicants to the Army, while allowing them to pay off their educations, he said.

"We had a guy who graduated from Harvard who enlisted to be an infantryman," Bocanegra said. "He told us, 'At the end of three years, I'll still have my Harvard degree, but I'll have gotten to do things that my college friends will never get to do. And my loans will be paid off, and I'll have served my country.'"

Another recruit who stands out in Bocanegra's mind had two master's degrees and was about \$80,000 in debt. The Army couldn't pay all of it, as the loan-repayment program has a cap of \$65,000, but they brought the recruit's debts down to manageable levels.

While the pool of applicants may

differ greatly between East L.A. and Santa Monica, and while the jobs may consequently seem to be very different, there is one common factor: long hours.

Like Alejandro, Bocanegra works from sunup to sundown, six days a week. Unlike Alejandro, who has a wife and daughter, Bocanegra is single. This, he said, makes his long hours and often-unpredictable schedule somewhat easier to bear.

"I don't have someone getting mad at me if I'm not home by a certain time, and I'm glad I don't have that pressure," Bocanegra said. "Because there are enough pressures that go with this job. Having been in the infantry for a few years, I got used to a certain kind of pressure, but this is totally different."

At about 7 p.m., Bocanegra finished a round of "cold calling," in which he systematically telephoned high school students who had expressed some interest in the Army. He shut off his computer and turned off the lights, then grabbed his gym bag, planning to work out on the way home.


Meanwhile, across town, Alejandro prepared to head home. He'd already spoken to two high school classes. He'd also met with a recruit's parents



Alejandro speaks with 16-year-old Lupe Cacho on an East L.A. street. She said she had never thought about joining the Army until Alejandro spoke to one of her classes. Now, she is planning to enlist.

in their home and answered their questions, and picked up and dropped off at home the recruit who'd gone to the airport on his own. Stuck in traffic, as the sun descended on the other side of the smog-covered hills, he called his wife on the phone.

"Sorry, I'm running late," he said. "Do you need me to pick anything up on the way home?" □



Young Soldiers Spread the Word

PFC Daniel Sotelo wants to spread the word: the Army is a good deal. The unit supply specialist from Fort Hood, Texas, comes back to Los Angeles on leave several times a year. He always makes a point of visiting Roosevelt High School, from which he graduated, to offer students a glimpse at some of the opportunities the Army offers them.

"The Army is really a good thing for people who want to make something of themselves," Sotelo said. "In this neighborhood, it is very difficult to stay away from gangs and from drugs, because they are ev-

erywhere. Many kids here are not taught how to set a goal and how to achieve it. The Army gives them a chance to learn."

When Sotelo comes back into town, he calls up Army recruiters and tries to coordinate his visits to the high school with their visits.

"I can answer people's questions and they know they can trust me, because I don't have anything to gain from them enlisting," Sotelo said. "I also know what kind of stuff they're interested in, because I was sitting where they're sitting not too long ago."

Sotelo enlisted in the summer of 1999. He said he became interested in the Army through being part of Junior ROTC. Now, he has his sights set on becoming a recruiter.

Other Jobs, Other Challenges

ARMY recruiting in Los Angeles has its own set of challenges, and not just for the recruiter on the street. The NCOs and officers working for the U.S. Army Recruiting Battalion, Los Angeles, also have their hands full. Just ask SSG Gregory Williamson. The 15-year recruiting veteran was a recruiter in Indiana and Sacramento before coming to the City of Angels. Now his job is to verify that people are eligible for security clearances.

"Every day we have somebody who thinks they're slick. They try to come in without telling us about their past criminal history," Williamson said. "We run checks on everybody, and we catch them. But it makes for an awful lot of work."

Williamson said Los Angeles is a city where many young people have had brushes with the law, and it is his job to work with the Defense

Security System to ensure that people enlist legally and honestly.

"What is considered a misdemeanor by a state may be considered a felony by the Army, and someone convicted of a felony has to wait a year before applying for a waiver to join," Williamson said. "I have my hands full trying to sort it all out here."

MAJ Oliver Black, the recruiting battalion's executive officer, also has his hands full. Among other tasks, Black helps decide whether people with less-than-spotless backgrounds are fit for entry into the Army.

"I talk to the individuals and try to see how sincere they are. I try to see if they've matured and if they are sorry for what they may have done when they were younger," Black said. "Then we have to look at the circumstances of what trouble they may have been in. Sometimes people are just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Other times,

"I'd like to come back here and motivate people. I'd like the opportunity to influence people's lives for the better," he said. "The Army's offered me a great opportunity, and I took advantage of it. If I can do it, anybody can."

At the Santa Monica recruiting station, PV1 Robert Cisneros is also doing his part to show potential recruits what the Army is like. Cisneros, who was recruited in Santa Monica, spent a few weeks in his old neighborhood under the Hometown Recruiter Program after completing basic training and administrative specialist AIT at Fort Jackson, S.C.

"Because I was just there, I can

answer a lot of questions about what recruits can expect when they get to Basic or AIT," Cisneros said. "Hopefully I can help out people who are just coming into the Army, as well as recruiters."

Cisneros said he joined the Army for the discipline. He was attending college and not doing too well, and he looked for a way to overcome what he calls "laziness," and to improve his work and study habits.

"I figured the Army could help, and it did. My family noticed a big difference in my habits since I've come back," Cisneros said. "Now I'm trying to help other people to

have that same chance to improve themselves."

Santa Monica recruiter SSG Michael Bocanegra said that Cisneros and other hometown recruiters are an asset to their team.

"It's been a while since a recruiter has been through Basic," Bocanegra said. "A young soldier can tell recruits just what to expect, and they can clear up a lot of misunderstandings."

In East L.A., recruiter SSG Francisco Alejandro said he also appreciates the efforts of hometown recruiters and volunteers such as Sotelo.

"Daniel has a lot of energy. He really wants to be a recruiter," Alejandro said. "I keep telling him that it's a lot of work and a lot of stress, but he really wants it. Maybe he'll be a regular recruiter someday, but now he is a big help to us." — *SSG John Valceanu*

we get individuals who have a history of trouble, and those people have no business in the Army."

In addition to reviewing applications for waivers from recruits who have had brushes with the law, Black has become intimately familiar with tattoos. In a city teeming with street gangs, tattoos are a big issue because gang members often use tattoos as identifying marks — much as the Army uses unit patches and rank symbols.

"We had an individual come in here wanting to join the Army who was covered in gang tattoos. He flat-out denied ever having anything to do with gang activity," Black said. "We told him to go back to his gang."

But things aren't always that cut-and-dried, according to Black. For example, some gang tattoos have made their way into mainstream culture.

"We had another kid come in. He had a tattoo that he didn't know is traditionally associated with a gang," Black said. "It turns out he got it because his girlfriend liked the design. We were skeptical at first, but it turned out to be the truth."

Black said nothing he had done before had prepared him for the experience of working in the L.A. recruiting battalion.

"I'm certainly learning about a lot of new things here," Black said. "It is a challenging experience, and it is worth it if we are able to bring quality people into the Army."

Individuals who are recruited must also be matched with appropriate jobs. That is SFC Yolanda Rock's job. The recruiting career

counselor said she finds it difficult but very rewarding.

"We are very limited by time constraints. I have approximately 20 minutes to spend with each applicant, and it is hard to help someone make a career decision in 20 minutes," Rock said. "First off, I make sure they qualify for the jobs in which they're interested. I also try to find out what their long-term goals and interests are, and I try to find an MOS that would be a good fit for them."

Rock said that seeing the system work well is her reward for doing her job.

"I like to see young people come in here, get a job that is right for them and return to ship for Basic Training," Rock said. "Then we receive postcards from Basic or AIT. Knowing that we offered a young person some good opportunities is the biggest treat for me." — *SSG John Valceanu*